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RR RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR RUEHRN
DE RUEHLG #0024/01 0140539
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 140539Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY LILONGWE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4961
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000024

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MALAWI: ANALYSTS CRITICIZE MUTHARIKA, BUT EXPECT HIM TO WIN AGAIN IN 2009

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Five of Malawi's most influential political scientists told poloff that President Mutharika, while ably managing the economy, has not upheld the rule of law; some fear that he may become more autocratic if his party can win a majority in the upcoming elections. Regionalism remains strong in party identification, while religion plays little role. The three major party leaders all have roots in the post-independence government and have discouraged the next generation of leaders from emerging. While all five political scientists felt former President Muluzi's attempt to run for president in 2009 is legally dubious, some suggested that if Muluzi competes, he could fracture the populous south enough to give Malawi Congress Party (MCP) candidate John Tembo a chance at the presidency. However, most agreed that Mutharika's economic progress will ensure his re-election as president, but will not guarantee the Democratic Progressive Party a majority in Parliament.

¶2. (SBU) In November 2007, poloff discussed the current political situation with five of the most influential and often-quoted political scientists in Malawi. University of Malawi Associate Professor Dr. Blessings Chinsinga is a specialist in development economics but is often quoted regarding rule of law issues. Dr. Mustafa Hussein is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Malawi on Political and Administrative Studies. Noel Mbowela is an Assistant Lecturer at Mzuzu University in the sparsely populated but politically important northern region of Malawi. Rafik Hajat and Dr. Nadini Patel are Director and Deputy Director at the Institute for Policy Interaction (IPI), a public policy think tank. Hajat is also a former office holder in the United Democratic Front (UDF) party and was among the framers of the current Malawian constitution back in 1993-1994.

President Mutharika and the Rule of Law

¶3. (SBU) The analysts agreed that while President Mutharika is doing a commendable job on the economy, he is failing to provide steady political leadership. They also charged that Mutharika has failed to uphold the rule of law. Most believed the dismissal of the National Assembly last September was clearly meant to prevent the Speaker from implementing floor-crossing legislation which would have weakened the ruling party. Hussein singled out the administration's failure to hold constitutionally-mandated local government elections in 2005 as President Mutharika's clearest violation of the law. Hajat commented that if Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) were to gain a majority in Parliament in 2009, the President's style of one-man rule would likely worsen. While all were concerned about the 2009 elections, all believed the elections would take place as scheduled.

Regionalism a Factor in Politics, Religion not

¶4. (SBU) All of the analysts agree that regionalism remains a major factor in Malawian politics. The UDF remains a southern region party, while the MCP still has the central region as its stronghold.

Mutharika's DPP has strong support in the south but has made headway in the central region as well. Mbowela added that the demise of Alliance for Democracy's (AFORD), which previously dominated the northern region, has created a vacuum which is likely to be filled by the DPP. While all agreed there are no significant ideological or policy differences among the parties, Hussein said that DPP's focus on economic development, food security, and anti-corruption held promise if the party could continue to deliver on its promises. Most agreed that DPP had the best chance to have national reach, but parliamentary elections, not presidential, would be the true indicator of its success.

15. (SBU) The analysts agreed religion is not a factor in Malawian politics. According to Hussein, himself a Muslim, former President Muluzi should not expect automatic Muslim support for his comeback bid. He said the Muslim community has seen more economic development under Mutharika than they had under Muluzi and that factor will influence the Muslim vote more than religion. Hussein added that the fact that the Muslim community has not rallied to Vice President Chilumpha's side in his treason trial is another sign that religious affiliation is not aligned to political affiliation.

Succession and the Next Generation of Leaders

16. (SBU) The analysts pointed out that tight control of the major political parties by their leaders has made it very difficult for a new generation of leaders to emerge. Chisinga referred to the situation as a "time bomb" for Malawi's politics. He argued that the fact that most national political leaders have been in politics since independence in 1964 bespeaks a culture hostile to leadership regeneration. Hajat believed that leadership talent existed, but those who control the parties needed to let it rise. He commented that autocratic governments were a logical outcome when leaders rule

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their own parties in the same manner.

Muluzi in 2009?

17. (SBU) Analysts see former President Muluzi's bid to stand for president in 2009 as legally dubious. However, a majority believe that Muluzi will find a way to stand. Few gave Muluzi much chance to win the presidential election outright; and Hajat and Patel believed other UDF candidates could have a stronger chance. Hajat and Patel both believe Muluzi will act as a spoiler by splitting the vote in the southern region with President Mutharika, thus giving MCP Leader John Tembo an opening to take the presidency with the backing of his central region stronghold.

18. (SBU) Mbowela argued that even with Muluzi in the race, Mutharika will still win the 2009 election with a majority of the votes. Mbowela argued that Mutharika is likely to win due to the success of his agricultural policy of subsidizing fertilizer.

19. (SBU) Comment: The five political analysts are the most quoted and consulted by Malawi's media; their repeated exposure has allowed them to influence and shape public opinion as well as assess it. While their pointed comments on human rights, rule of law, and democracy help to provide a check to government and party leaders, the pundits themselves are not immune to influence. The outspoken Hajat still provides counsel to Muluzi and UDF on occasion while also keeping Mutharika accountable. Recent reports also hint that MCP in an attempt to curry favor in the southern region may consider an influential professor like Hussein as a potential running mate to Tembo.

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